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C O N F I D E N T I A L ASMARA 000260

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TAGS: PREL EFIS ER YM

SUBJECT: ERITREA CONFISCATES YEMENI FISHING BOATS

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for reason 1.4 (d)

¶1. (SBU) Eritrean maritime authorities have recently seized a number of Yemeni fishing vessels allegedly fishing illegally in Eritrean waters. The crewmembers are jailed in Massawa until their companies or relatives pay a sizable fine, then they are released to make their way back to Yemen. Eritrea confiscates the boats, equipment, catch, and fuel, according Yemeni Ambassador Abdulkader Mohamed Hadi. Sometimes the Yemeni boats are clearly in Eritrean waters ("because there are so many fish there," one captain told Hadi) while in other instances the location of the seizure is arguably in international waters.

¶2. (C) The Yemeni ambassador is extremely upset with Eritrean authorities for not even informing his embassy when they seize a Yemeni boat and crew. The Yemeni embassy has no consular access to imprisoned crewmembers and only finds out about such instances when Yemeni companies or families complain. When there is an open question whether a Yemeni boat may have been seized in international waters, Ambassador Hadi said that Eritrean Navy commander Karikare is the only official who will talk to him in an attempt to resolve the issue. "Karikare is a good guy—he spent 6 or 7 years during the Struggle in Yemen and knows us well," he said.

¶3. (C) COMMENT: Besides safeguarding Eritrea's marine resources, the regime is concerned about black market currency being smuggled across the southern Red Sea. The market rate for the Nakfa is just one-third its official rate, so smugglers of cheap Nakfa from Yemen can get a two-thirds discount on anything in Eritrea (not that there's much to buy). Having been targeted by Eritrea Islamic Jihad in past years, regime leaders also want to deter would-be jihadists from entering the country by boat from Yemen. With tens of thousands of young Eritreans risking everything to flee Isaia's open-air prison, the Eritrean Navy may be attempting to shut down this escape route for those who are seeking a better life in Yemen or beyond.

MCMULLEN